The Ruler of All Things:

The Sovereignty of God in the Life of Elijah

"Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name" (1 Chronicles 29:11–13).

Introduction

The period between Elijah's appearance before King Ahab in 1 Kings 17:1 and God's command in 1 Kings 18:1 for him to return to Ahab lasted about three and a half years. James 5:17 specifies the length of the drought that defined that time, and Luke 4:25 confirms it. These years were characterized by Israel's growing spiritual decline, the gradual destruction of the land under divine judgment, and the quiet, deliberate preparation of a prophet who would soon face one of the most dramatic public confrontations in the Old Testament.

In chapter 17, we followed Elijah through this same period by watching his faith, seeing how God commanded, how Elijah obeyed, and how God proved Himself faithful at every turn. We saw how trials of that kind build the perseverance and maturity that James describes,[1] the sort of seasoned faith a person needs before God sends him into a storm. Now we return to the same passage, not to cover old ground, but to stand on it and look further. What we find when we do is the sovereignty of God.

The sovereignty of God is a truth that runs throughout 1 Kings 17. It is impossible to read that chapter carefully without being repeatedly struck by the fact that God is in complete, personal, and close control of everything. A simple and helpful definition of that sovereignty, based on David's prayer in 1 Chronicles 29, is this: God's sovereignty is His freedom to do as He chooses and His total authority over all His creatures. He is the ruler of everything. As we will

[1] "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2–4).

see, this truth appears in three ways in this chapter: His sovereign control over creation, His sovereign grace in redemption, and His sovereign care for His people.

The Sovereign Ruler Over All Creation

The first and clearest sign of God's sovereignty in 1 Kings 17 is His complete authority over creation. This is evident in both ordinary and extraordinary ways. The drought mentioned in verse 1 was a direct display of Jehovah's control over the natural world, and its timing was perfectly deliberate. Israel had turned away from the living God to serve Baal, the supposed deity of nature, whom the Phoenicians and Canaanites believed controlled the sun, rain, and fertility. The drought was God's response to that idolatry, serving as a prolonged and unmistakable proof that Jehovah alone rules over the heavens and the earth. Not Baal, but Jehovah, decides when the rain comes.

The remarkable acts of God in this chapter deepen the same truth on a more personal level. In 1 Kings 17:4, God instructed the ravens to bring Elijah food, and 17:6 shows they did so consistently, bringing him bread and meat morning and evening. These birds of prey, creatures driven by instinct, normally keep what they find. Yet they obeyed their Creator's command and brought food to His servant that they would usually eat themselves. In 17:10, the widow appeared at the gate of Zarephath just as Elijah arrived. This was a seemingly ordinary event but one arranged by divine design. In 17:16, the jar of flour and the jug of oil were continuously replenished by a miracle that defies natural explanation. And in 17:22, in response to Elijah's earnest prayer, the Lord brought the widow's dead son back to life.

Taken together, these events confirm the same truth: God is personally and intimately involved in all things. He is not a distant architect who set the world in motion and then stepped back from it. He controls the flight of ravens, the arrival of widows, and what is inside clay jars. Our Lord Jesus affirmed this when He said that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without the Father's knowledge, and that God numbers the very hairs of our heads (Matthew 10:29–30). These are not just comforting thoughts. They are declarations about God's nature and the character of His sovereign rule.

It is worth noticing how different this is from the typical outlook of our own time. A visit to Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home in Virginia, provides a sad example. Among Jefferson's

writings and books on display, there appears to be a Bible. However, closer inspection reveals that all references to miracles or supernatural events have been completely removed. Jefferson was a deist who believed in a Creator God but had no ongoing personal involvement in the world He made.[2] Jefferson may be long gone, but the mindset he had is very much present today. Modern deists exist in every generation. Their impulse is always the same: to find an explanation that leaves God at a comfortable distance. This is why words like "mother nature," luck, chance, and coincidence are so common. All of these express the same core unbelief: a God who is not really present, is not truly in control, and is not genuinely interested in the details.

For Christians, the mighty acts of God recorded in Scripture are not difficult to understand. We believe that the God who spoke the world into existence and rules it for His own purposes can certainly perform wondrous and powerful deeds within it. If God can change a human heart that is spiritually dead because of sin, then bringing a child back to life and daily replenishing a widow's flour jar are well within His power. Paul makes the point clearly in Colossians 1:16–17: "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Clearly, He who sustains the universe by His powerful word is not at all burdened by providing for a prophet in the wilderness.

Arthur Pink offers insightful comments on God's sovereign control and explains why miracles present no obstacle to the believer's understanding. He writes,

> Here is the reason why that which staggers and stumbles the wise of this world is plain and simple to the Christian. The preservation of Noah and his family in the ark, Israel's passing through the Red Sea dryshod, the survival of Jonah in the whale's belly, present no difficulty to him at all. He knows that the Word of God is inerrant, for the truth thereof has been verified in his own experience. Having proved for himself that the Gospel of Christ is 'the power of God unto salvation,' he has no reason to doubt anything recorded in Holy Writ concerning the prodigies of His might in the material realm. The believer is fully assured that nothing is too hard for the Maker of heaven and earth. It is not that he is an intellectual simpleton, credulously accepting what is altogether contrary to reason,

[2] The classic description of a deist is one who views God as a great "clockmaker" who created the universe, set it in motion, and then withdrew from further involvement. The deist acknowledges that someone had to design and construct the clock with its intricate parts, but once it was made, there was no need for continued oversight. This illustrates their view of God.

> but that, in the Christian, reason is restored to its normal functioning: predicate a God who is almighty, and the supernatural working of His hand necessarily follows.[3]

Miracles in God's Word often tend to cluster around specific periods and purposes. In Elijah's case, their goals are twofold. First, they confirm him as God's true prophet at a time when the prophets of Baal had the court's attention and the people's loyalty. Second, they act as tools for building and strengthening faith. This second purpose is clear in the response of the widow of Zarephath after her son was revived from the dead. Her words in 17:24 are simple yet powerful: "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth." The miracle had fulfilled its purpose. Her faith was expanded and expressed more clearly.

Sovereign Grace and the Authority of the Word

God's sovereignty in 1 Kings 17 reaches beyond His control over the physical world. It moves just as powerfully into the realm of salvation. The story of the widow of Zarephath is not just about miraculous provision. It illustrates sovereign grace, showing how God chooses to reveal Himself to a Gentile woman outside the covenant community of Israel, entirely independent of any deserving or seeking on her part.

Our Lord Jesus emphasized this part of the story in the synagogue at Nazareth. In Luke 4:24–30, He pointed out that during Elijah's time, there were many widows in Israel, yet God did not send His prophet to any of them, only to a widow in Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, a Gentile. The congregation's reaction was furious, revealing what was truly at stake. They did not want to accept that God has the right to show favor to whomever He chooses, including those outside Israel. But that is exactly what God did. His sovereignty in grace is not limited by human expectations or ethnic privilege. That same anger is rarely far from the surface when the biblical teaching of election is faithfully proclaimed today. The anger in that Nazareth synagogue and the anger often provoked by the doctrine of God's electing grace share the same foundation, a refusal to accept that God is sovereign in the distribution of His mercy and grace.

[3]Arthur W. Pink, *The Life of Elijah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 86.

The prophet Isaiah expressed God's divine prerogative centuries earlier: "I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that was not called by my name"(Isaiah 65:1). The widow of Zarephath had not been seeking God. She had not requested a prophet to come to her door. Yet God, in His sovereign grace, had already been working in her heart before Elijah arrived. 1 Kings 17:9 stands out in this regard: God told Elijah that He had commanded the widow to provide for him, before Elijah and the widow had ever met.

Roger Ellsworth notes that this is the Word of God coming to the widow with sovereign authority. He writes,

> As we have already seen, God could have sustained Elijah forever at the brook at Cherith. There was no need or physical reason why Elijah should travel to Zarephath. Nor was the move to provide Elijah with some human companionship. If that were the case, why did God not send Elijah to one of the widows in Israel (Luke 4:25–26)? Some would answer that Elijah might have been discovered if he stayed in Israel, but God was just as capable of protecting the prophet right under Ahab's nose as he was in a far-off land. Neither was the journey necessary because the widow was seeking knowledge of the true God. When Elijah began talking to the woman she undoubtedly recognized him as being an Israelite and she referred to his God (verse 12), but in so doing she made it clear that his God was not her God. Although the Lord said that he had 'commanded' a widow in Zarephath to care for Elijah (verse 9), how could he do so if she did not even own him as her God? The only answer is that the Lord had chosen her before she was even aware of it. She was selected to serve as a hostess to the Word of God before she ever chose to. It was all due to God's sovereign grace at work in her life.[4]

This illustrates God's sovereign work in redemption. If God has chosen a people for Himself, and Scripture states that "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48), then He will prepare those individuals to respond to the gospel when it reaches them. God's election and the preparation of hearts to receive grace are not in conflict. They are two parts of one sovereign work by the eternal God.

The parallel to the gospel is further seen through Elijah's demand upon the widow in 17:13. His request for her final handful of flour was not a cold or harsh demand. It was the Word of God reaching out to her with sovereign authority, making a claim on her faith. She was being

[4]Roger Ellsworth, *Standing for God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 32–33.

asked to surrender what she could see and hold in exchange for a promise she could not yet see or hold. Faith, in other words, was not optional. It was the very thing being demanded of her.

This recurring demand appears throughout Scripture, and the author of Hebrews highlights one of its most powerful examples. Like the widow, Abraham heard God's Word come to him with a demand he could not just figure out logically. He was called to leave everything familiar and journey toward an unknown destination. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). There is a deep comfort in that simple phrase, "not knowing where he was going." Abraham did not have a map. He had no plan. He did hear a voice, and he trusted the One who spoke. It is the same for us today. We, too, are called to believe, not because we see everything that lies ahead, but because we know the One who holds and controls all things. That is the very essence of faith.

When the gospel comes to each of us, faith is required, and it is no small thing that is being asked. We are called to let go of our own understanding, our own securities, and follow a Savior we have not seen with our eyes. Yet here is the wonder of it: God does not leave His people to manufacture faith on their own. His Word carries power. His Spirit goes before it and His sheep, as Jesus promised, hear their Shepherd's voice and come.

The pattern is the same. God speaks, faith is required, and the one who hears must act on what they cannot yet see. Ellsworth offers a valuable reflection on the nature of this demand. He writes,

> What would she do? What would you do? Somehow, she heard the Word of God sounding in the words of Elijah. The power of that Word worked faith in her heart, she willingly did as Elijah commanded, and received the promise he had given. Notice, however, that she actually had to do something. She was not allowed to get by with merely telling Elijah that she believed in her heart everything he was saying. She actually had to act upon that. She could have nodded her agreement endlessly, but she could only prove her faith by scraping the last handful of meal out of that barrel, pouring out that last precious drop of oil from the jar, and making Elijah that cake. Has it occurred to you that this is nothing less than a miniature picture of the gospel of Jesus Christ? The gospel confronts you with the same demand: namely, to give your all. Oh, it seems like

> this is so very much, but in reality our all is like the widow's barrel and oil, temporary and perishing.[5]

The gospel comes with more than just a demand. Along with God's command, there is also God's gracious promise. As soon as Elijah asked in 17:13, he declared the promise in 17:14 that the jar of flour would not run out, and the jug of oil would not be exhausted until the Lord sent rain again. The widow responded with faith and obedience. Matthew Henry's comment on 17:15 captures the significance of that moment beautifully. He writes that "surely the increase of this widow's faith, to such a degree as to enable her thus to deny herself and to depend upon the divine promise, was as great a miracle in the kingdom of grace as the increase of her oil was in the kingdom of providence. Happy are those who can thus, against hope, believe and obey in hope."[6]

The ultimate result of God's sovereign grace in sending His word to this Gentile widow was faith and obedience, the same fruits that sovereign grace always produces when it works in a human heart. This is the pattern of the gospel, and the widow's story serves as a quiet but clear example of the grace of God and the power of His Word.

The Providence of God in Dark Circumstances

The story of the widow does not end at verse 16 with the daily miracle of the flour and oil. If it were a storybook, it might end there with a happy ending. But the sovereign God who sent His prophet to the widow's house was not finished with either of them. In the following verses, the widow's son fell ill and died. This is one of those moments in Scripture that seems to elude an easy explanation, and it seems intentionally so.

We need to understand that providence reflects sovereignty. A clear definition is this: God's providence is His ongoing care for and complete rule over all His creation, for His glory and the good of His people. While that definition is simple enough in theory, we all know that it becomes much harder to grasp during painful and confusing times. The widow responded in faith to the Word of God. She obeyed, even at a great personal cost. She had seen God's faithfulness through the daily provision of food, but now her precious son was dead.

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[5]Ellsworth, *Standing for God*, 35.
[6]Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, on 1 Kings 17:15.

Her words to Elijah in 17:18 reveal an important aspect of how humans instinctively respond to dark and difficult situations. She believed her son's death was connected to her own sin, thinking that the presence of a man of God in her house had exposed her guilt and caused this tragedy. The desire to explain suffering by blaming oneself, God, or circumstances is a very human reaction. However, it is not usually a reliable way to understand what God is truly doing. We cannot always understand why painful things happen to us, and we should be cautious in trying to do so. Instead, we can trust a sovereign God who has shown His love for us in ways that go far beyond our experiences and understanding.

How did this dark providence serve God's purposes? Both dimensions of the definition of providence, His glory and His people's good, are visible in the outcome. The raising of the son brought glory to God from the widow, from Elijah, and from all who would hear of it. And the widow's confession in verse 24 was itself an act of worship: "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth." Her faith was not destroyed by the trial. It was clarified and deepened by it. Roger Ellsworth reflects on the specific advantages this providence brought to both Elijah and the widow. He writes,

> With the widow and her son, God did not fail at all. The son lived. But in seeming to fail God accomplished two great things. Firstly, he brought the woman to a higher plane of trust than she ever had before. She came away from this experience saying: 'Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is the truth' (verse 24). Secondly, by seeming to fail God gave Elijah a powerful object lesson. For all practical purposes the nation of Israel was dead, but there was no need for Elijah to despair because he received through the widow's son first-hand evidence that God can raise the dead! When the Lord finally said to Elijah: 'Go, present yourself to Ahab' (18:1), Elijah went in full confidence of the power of the omnipotent God.[7]

Waiting, Trusting, and Praying

The question this all raises for us is a very practical one: how do we respond when a dark and difficult providence enters our lives? What is a Christian supposed to do when everything seems to go wrong, when the God he trusts appears to have failed him, when obedience does not yield the expected results, and suffering hits us without warning?

[7]Ellsworth, *Standing for God*, 40–41.

The story of the widow and Elijah shows us two responses, one from the widow and one from the prophet. The first is to wait and trust. The widow's initial reaction, expressed in 17:18, was to cry out in pain and confusion, seeking an explanation to make sense of her suffering. That response is understandable and human. But what she was not able to see at that moment was that God had not abandoned her. The sovereign God who had sent His Word to her and provided her daily bread had not forgotten her in her grief. His purposes, though hidden from her at that moment, were working toward both His glory and her good. The call in such moments is to trust in a sovereign God who loves His people, even when His providence is painful, and His ways are beyond our understanding.

Dear reader, it is often in the hardest trials of our lives, when reason and faith seem to fail us, that the best thing that we can do is bow down and worship. In the words of the psalmist, we find in Psalm 95:6, "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!" Our loving heavenly Father knows what we are going through and will provide His all-sufficient grace. I believe the prophet Isaiah said the following to God's people facing challenging times. "Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God" (Isaiah 50:10).

Job faced trials of staggering severity, losing his children, his health, and the counsel of friends who only deepened his pain. Yet despite this, he could still declare, "though he slay me, I will hope in him" (Job 13:15a). We may not understand the reasons for the difficult providences we encounter in life, but we must never forget that the God of Holy Scripture, who sovereignly controls all things, is loving and good in every way.

The second response is to pray. Elijah was troubled by what had occurred. 1 Kings 17:20 shows us a man who brought his pain directly to God with great passion, crying out to the Lord and lying on the child three times. This activity reflects both his deep emotion and his persistent faith. He did not turn away from God during difficult times. We see the genuine prayer of a righteous man. He persisted, and God responded to him.

Waiting on God and crying out to God are not the same, but both are acts of faith, and neither is passive. They are directed toward a sovereign God who rules over all things, whose

wisdom surpasses our understanding, and whose faithfulness has been demonstrated repeatedly to those who have trusted Him. The entire chapter of 1 Kings 17 is a beautiful example of God's sovereignty and trustworthiness. He controlled the rain, the ravens, the oil, and the breath of a dead child. He is the ruler of everything, and He is our God.

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22,23).